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New Doctoral Supervisors in Emotional Challenging Situations

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Abstract:

Many universities offer future doctoral supervisors training in order to develop the knowledge and skills required in order to succeed in this role. Yet often times, an unexperienced supervisor will face various emotionally challenging situations and must develop own coping strategies. Despite the importance and impact these challenges represent for new supervisors, relatively few studies have been carried out in this area. This paper presents the preliminary results of a newly started interview and focus group study focusing on emotionally challenging situations in doctoral supervision. Interviews with new supervisors have been carried out in universities both in Sweden and in Mozambique. By analysing and looking more in detail at what these concrete situations might look like, we can broaden our practical knowledge about how to effectively manage them, while also widening our theoretical concepts when interviewing new supervisors from very different research settings.

Paper:

Introduction

As a new unexperienced doctoral supervisor, you will face various emotionally challenging situations and must be able to find strategies to cope with these (Lindqvist 2019). Increasing emphasis has been placed on the doctoral supervisors and their key role for a successful research education. By analysing successful and more experienced supervisors we know that different supervisory roles prove to be useful tools in supervision for the modern doctorate (Lee 2008). However, less emphasis has been put on the well-being and support for doctoral supervisors and their strategies to manage the first years in what is a new and often times unfamiliar role for them (Wisker and Robinson 2016).

The purpose in the present paper is to call attention to a number of emotionally challenging situations that supervisors can face and the different strategies they develop during this process. The coping with the challenges can also be related to the new supervisors' experiences of well-being. In order to direct future supervisors to more empirically based decisions in challenging situations, this paper reviews some of the principle supervisory coping strategies, and offers a selective summary of some preliminary findings (McAlpine and Amundsen (2012).

Case study and method

This study is part of a newly-started global capacity-building project, financed by SIDA (Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency), a collaboration between The Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences and Uppsala University, and in partnership with Eduardo Mondlane University (UEM) in Maputo, Mozambique. The training for upcoming doctoral supervisors in these all three universities, includes how to face a set of challenging situations; for example, how to manage conflicts, how to communicate in a supervisory team and with the PhD, how to handle ethical dilemmas, the importance of research ethics, and knowing about laws and regulations. This can be seen as a starting package, but the new supervisors will more or less have to find their own ways to develop their skills and competences when they take on their first PhD. This journey from a junior "know-how-supervisor", to a senior reflective supervisor is lined with challenges.

This qualitative research stems from semi-structured face-to-face interviews and focus group interviews with new doctoral supervisors both in Sweden and in Mozambique. In the focus groups both men and women from various disciplines and subject areas participated. They were all participants in supervision courses for new supervisors held by our educational development unit and invited to participate in this study. The supervisors from UEM were all in a supervision development program. All empirical material was transcribed in detail and then analysed. In the process of theorizing (Swedberg 2014) different mysteries appeared (Alvesson and Kärreman 2007, Bertilsson 2016). One was the "emotionally challenging situations" that occurred in all interviews but in different shapes. We recently started our deeper analysis, hence the results are preliminary findings.

Preliminary outcomes

However, we have already discovered what appear to be some very interesting patterns. There are so many different types of situations that are emotionally challenging. One such example is how supervisors often need to handle their doctoral students' emotional dilemmas and concerns regarding their private vs. working life puzzle. Supervisors also need to find strategies to balance their engagement on one hand with the doctoral students' work, and on the other hand, for their own research career. Moreover, although the internal relationship in the supervisory group is mostly a source of support, however, it can also be troublesome and challenging. The coping strategies differ among the new supervisors, but also vary depending on the cultural context (Winchester-Seeto et al. 2014).

Firstly, the PhD's commitment seems to create challenges. For example, Luisa, a supervisor from UEM, shares her experiences with a PhD student's lack of motivation:

And always for me, she is saying "I got so sick" and then people were telling me "oh I saw her, here in Maputo" and she didn't even look for me. I tried to put myself in her shoes but then ... ok now, and then I just left, I said "ok, if you want to finish it...now it was too much.

Secondly, an emotionally challenging situation could be related to the relationship within the supervisory team and the fear of stepping into the territory of a more senior colleague. Here, Maria,

a supervisor from SLU, describes and verbalizes her concerns about tensions within the supervisory team:

Yes, but I think if you say how the supervisor there, she..it is a little bit of the ownership and rivalry in some way. Yes but it's just my feeling. But I think it is this bit of rivalry here but I just have to put it down. I think that is my melody right now. I mean I must accept that it is so. It should not be that the supervisor group should be there to make me feel happy, but...

Concluding remarks

It seems that all new supervisors will at some point face emotionally challenging situations; they do so in many different areas of their work and thus the coping strategies appear to be many. By analysing and looking more in detail at what these concrete situations might look like, we can broaden our practical knowledge about how to effectively manage them, while also widening our theoretical concepts when analysing interviews with new supervisors from both Sweden and Mozambique.

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